

How Is TV Covering Vietnam?

By JACK GOULD

THE Vietnam war is the first major engagement to be covered by television since the end of the Korean conflict and for the American public it means the nightly experience of being a vicarious eyewitness to the agonies and hardships of battle. It has been a shattering experience for the home viewer to encounter at first hand the impact of seeing G.I.'s and marines trying to articulate the ordeal of losing comrades or pursuing elusive guerrillas.

The heart-rending drama of youngsters learning the brutality of war necessarily is something that TV and other media must cover in detail and television cannot be expected to blink its eye at the mounting casualties. The initiative and bravery of the TV correspondents and, more particularly, the unsung cameramen who venture to the front lines with all their bulky equipment will eventually stand as a remarkable chapter in electronic journalism.

Reportorial Mission

But if, as now ominously appears to be the case, the Vietnam war is going to last indefinitely and the number of troops is to be constantly escalated, it would seem that the television medium may have to re-evaluate the nature of its reportorial approach to the fateful events in Southeast Asia.

One understandable reaction to the graphic pictures of the ebb and flow of battle is to compound the latent national uneasiness over American involvement in a clash that may easily draw the nation into an Asian land-war. This impact, strongly emphasized in the fitful visual bulletins appearing every evening on the networks that penetrate so many homes, could be construed as a double-edged factor in national policy. On the one hand, it stimulates the human yearning for a peaceful settlement felt by every viewer; on the other, it could be a psychological drag on the successful execution of a military effort that, wise or not in all its ramifications, constitutes a firm national commitment.

But where commercial television leaves much to be desired is in the essential superficiality of coverage that tends to subordinate the cultural, political and social implications of an Asian war to the stark drama of the battlefield. Partly because TV is so attuned to reporting everything and anything with the speed common to the medium, it has not adequately allowed for a deeper and more searching probe of the quality of mind and values of the enemy.

There have been roundtables of network correspondents, such as those presented by the Columbia Broadcasting System, the National Broadcasting Company and the American Broadcasting Company. They have been helpful to a degree in suggesting the war's complexity and the reasons why it is so hard to reduce the objectives of the Vietnam conflict to the same familiar patterns that applied in World Wars I and II.

In a sense, the dilemma of TV journalism is the dilemma of the nation itself. In European conflicts, the prob-

lem was reduced to eradicating fanatics and vicious despots who ran amuck and had to be brought down. But in social terms, the wars were conducted within the framework of Western culture. The goals of the Allied Forces were at least recognizable and understandable.

The conflict in Vietnam poses not only a military difficulty but a formidable educational challenge to the American people. The average layman's knowledge or that part of the world is virtually nonexistent and the lack of insight into the nature of the enemy would seem at least a small contributory factor to our difficulties. No one would expect television alone to increase the sum of general knowledge about Asia; it is a point that both the Administration and other news media have skimmed over. The only affirmative suggestion is that TV, with its unrivaled power, might be able to play a big role by providing more information.

An example of what might be done was offered recently by National Educational Television in its presentation of a full lecture by Prof. John K. Fairbank of Harvard University, a specialist in Asian affairs. In emphasizing that North Vietnam was within the sphere of Red China, its powerful neighbor to the north, Professor Fairbank illustrated what he thought were some of the contrasts in cultural values that would influence the future.

Not Esteemed

Individualism in the Chinese culture, he noted, is not usually held in esteem. It tends to be equated with selfishness, just as freedom of the person can be construed as a lack of discipline and control, a refusal to cooperate. Similarly, he noted, in China an attack on a person's policies may be regarded as an attack on the person himself. It is well to remember, he went on, that the cherished American propensity for philanthropy through grants-in-aid may be an embarrassment in Chinese terms. Historically, a gift to one person implies an act of reciprocity by the recipient and, if he cannot afford to do so, only invites loss of stature.

Whether Professor Fairbank's views are borne out by other specialists necessarily is open to question. But he did make clear the point that counts. Any military challenge to the influence of Red China contains the seeds of an onslaught on a completely different society that has lived in isolation for thousands of years and which has its roots in values totally strange and puzzling to the West.

For the layman lacking familiarity with Asian standards, the effectiveness of the lecture was to open new windows through which to view the puzzling enigma of China and North Vietnam. It gave rise to the thought that television and other media, possibly even the Administration itself, might assist in the new type of reporting that today's events require. The legman most concerned about being where the action is could be missing the awesome undercurrents that may carry civilization to destinations unknown.